

Isaiah 1

Philip W. L. Fong

September 23, 2007

[2–3]

- v. 2 is an allusion to the testimony of Moses against Israel (Deuteronomy 4:25–31; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1–43).
- v. 3 compares Israel to mindless and senseless animals. The ox and the ass were considered not to be intelligent in the ancient Near East.
- Both the traditions of law and wisdom bear witness against Israel.

[4–9]

- v. 4: The essence of Israel's sin is her rebellion against God.
- vv. 5–6: The imagery is that of a rebellious slave repeatedly chastised by his master.
- vv. 7–8: The verses visualize the sustained Assyrian threat: e.g., the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III, the Israel-Syrian coalition, the Assyrian invasion during the reign of Hezekiah.
- v. 9 The remnant motif first appears here.

[10–17]

- v. 10 sharpens the accusation, and singles out the rulers of Judah.
- vv. 11–14: The enumeration of carefully differentiated cultic rituals are categorically rejected by God. It turns out that the sin of Israel lies not in cultic oversight.
- v. 15: The only thing God can see in their prayerful hands is the blood of violence.
- vv. 16–17: What God wills, and what Israel fails to do, is to establish a community of justice and love, in which the oppressed are defended. God is warning Israel not to substitute cultic enthusiasm for social justice. Doing so is a betrayal of God's character.

Digression. Why do we care? We are not Israel. We are already in the NT era.

- Review the vocation of Israel: Exodus 19:4–6.
- Peter rephrased the vocation, and applied it to the NT Church (1 Peter 2:9)!
- Similar transfer occurs in Pauline epistles.
- To the apostles Peter and Paul, we are the new Israel, the new covenant people of God, sharing the same vocation as Israel.

Reflection. Who are the oppressed in our society? Who are the “orphans” and “widows” today? These people do not carry an ID card clearly labeling them as “the oppressed”. In most cases, they are the ones who are forgotten by the society. The church, as a compassionate people of God, must actively seek them out, defend their cause, and love them as the Lord would have loved them.

[18–20]

- The genre at work here is a court case (v. 18a). “Let us reason together” should have been rendered as “Let us debate our case together.”
- v. 18b: Unlike what is usually suggested in popular exposition, this verse is not a promise of forgiveness. The precise sense of the sentence is the topic of ongoing scholarly debate. Here we adopt the suggestion of Childs, and read this verse as a conditional statement:

*Though your sins are crimson,
they can become white as snow;
though they are red as dyed wool,
they can become like fleece.*

Such a reading is more consistent with the court-case language, and it flows more naturally to vv. 19–20.

- vv. 19–20 are the standard Deuteronomic expression of covenantal blessings and curses. Isaiah here is simply repeating the spirit of the Mosaic law, the foundation on which God builds a just society. He is warning Israel that covenantal curses are imminent if she does not repent. Yet it is still not too late; there is still a possibility to return to the right way.

[21–26]

- vv. 21–22 speak of the corruption of the people of God, and their deviation from their very reason of existence.
- v. 23 directs the accusation to those in the position to maintain justice and defend the oppressed.

- v. 24 refers to these rulers as God's foe. The passion is consistent with the OT portrait of God as one who fathers the fatherless and defends the widow (Psalm 68:5; see also Psalm 146:9).
- vv. 25–26—presents a promise to restore the leadership and justice of Zion. This is the first appearance of the restoration motif.

[27–31]

- Here is a description of how God will deal with the two types of responses to this message.
- The language of oaks and gardens has to do with idolatry.